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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 003147

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GOS HOLDS THE LINE ON FREE SPEECH

REF: SINGAPORE 2058

Classified By: E/P Counselor Laurent Charbonnet for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

1. (C) Summary: The GOS continues to narrowly define the parameters of free speech in Singapore -- extending into the internet -- and constraints on public protest remain firmly in place. The convictions of three Singaporeans for racist comments made on the internet are the latest indication that the GOS will not tolerate speech it deems to be racist in any forum. A rare public protest over the GOS's failure to open an expensive subway station resulted in a stern GOS warning to the unnamed perpetrators. A prominent academic's discussion of the role of civil disobedience in Singaporean society elicited a public shot across the bow from the Prime Minister's office. Though only a small part of his farewell speech, the Ambassador's comments on Singapore's restrictions on free expression received widespread media attention. End Summary.

Bloggers Jailed for Violating Sedition Act

2. (U) On October 7, the court sentenced Benjamin Koh Song Huat, 27, and Nicholas Lim Yew, 25, to jail for allegedly racist remarks posted on the internet about ethnic minority Malays. Koh was sentenced to one month's imprisonment while Lim was fined SGD 5,000 and jailed for one day. Both were convicted of violating the Sedition Act, a 1948 law that had not been previously used against individuals. On October 26, a third Singaporean, 17 year-old Gan Huai Shi, was also convicted of publishing racist comments on his internet blog.

3. (U) Following the filing of sedition charges against the bloggers, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated that the GOS would not tolerate any racist comments, whether posted on the internet or in other media: "It doesn't matter where you say it, this is a message that is not acceptable. It is against the law and the Sedition Act specifically...If you publish such stuff, anywhere you go, we will act."

Buangkok Subway Station: A White Elephant?

4. (U) On August 28, to coincide with the visit of a government minister, eight cardboard cutout white elephants appeared outside a subway station that had been completed two years ago, but never opened. Although PM Lee had stated that the government does not build "white elephant" public works projects, complaining local residents disagreed. Even grassroots members of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) had urged the GOS to open the station, to no avail.

5. (U) Immediately after the police allegedly received an anonymous complaint, the elephants were removed (by whom it is not known), and police have thus far been unable to track them down. Police conducted an investigation as to whether Singapore's Public Entertainments and Meetings Act (PEMA), which requires a license for public displays, had been violated. The investigation resulted in a "stern warning" to the unnamed perpetrators, who many speculated were PAP grassroots leaders. When ribbed about the case, GOS officials have (while slightly squirming) stated the police are obligated to investigate every complaint.

"Managing Civil Disobedience"

6. (U) In response to the "white elephant" affair, Dr. Cherian George, a leading academic and political commentator, placed an article on his blog, which the Straits Times then published. The article, "Managing Civil Disobedience," noted that the stern warning issued in the white elephant case would not deter opposition activists from deliberately "breaking the law to make a political point" and alluded to opposition leader Dr. Chee Soon Juan's promotion of non-violent civil disobedience. Dr. George characterized the government's method of dealing with public protest in general as one of "calibrated coercion," wherein challenges to government rule were suppressed with minimal force and maximum effectiveness.

7. (C) Chen Hwai Lian, the Press Secretary to PM Lee, responded to Dr. George on the forum page of the Straits Times, prompting a response from Dr. George that the

government had mistaken his analysis for advocacy, in turn prompting a rejoinder from Chen that Dr. George had failed to be non-partisan in his analysis. A member of the PM's staff averred that these exchanges were an example of the GOS' engaging in a dialogue with its critics, not firing a shot across their bow.

The Ambassador's Farewell

18. (U) In his wide-ranging farewell speech, the Ambassador asked, "In this era of Weblogs and Webcams, how much sense does it make to limit political expression?" He noted that governments would "pay an increasing price for not allowing full participation of their citizens," but expressed confidence that Singapore would rise to this challenge. Though only a few sentences in a larger speech, the Ambassador's comments on political expression were played up by the foreign media, such as the Financial Times (FT), as a "rare public rebuke" to Singapore.

19. (SBU) Singapore's Ambassador to the United States, Chan Heng Chee, raised her concerns over the "mischaracterization" with the Ambassador. The Straits Times published the speech in its entirety, which put the remarks in the right perspective. The chairman of the Singapore Institute for International Affairs -- which hosted the speech -- plans to publish a commentary in the Straits Times noting that the Ambassador's comments were a "suggestion from a friend" as opposed to a "slap in the face" and that such constructive criticism is necessary for effective international dialogue.

Comment

110. (C) All these events reinforce how tightly the GOS continues to monitor and restrict public discourse. Though the white elephant caper could have been viewed as humorous, creative dissent, the GOS conducted a criminal investigation. When the perpetrators were found to be PAP members, the GOS issued a stern warning rather than prosecuting the offenders -- a leniency not often afforded the opposition. Though GOS rhetoric claims to support a freer and more open civil society, its actions indicate that the GOS will continue to maintain strict control over public debate.

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